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Editorial

The recent Arab uprisings might not have been the outcome of civil society activism and more the result of widespread dissatisfaction, 'mass revolutionary fervour' that spread across 'loose horizontal networks' (Cavatorta 2013, 4). However, when thinking about what precipitated the uprisings one must consider the decades of civil society activism from the cultural and artistic spheres –expressed through cinematic productions, literature, popular music, arts, cartoons and graffiti—which paved the way for the recent revolutionary fervour in the Arabic-speaking region. Individual artists and cultural producers have creatively engaged in their own contexts to promote social and political awareness of oppression and injustice, to change and offer alternative visions of society and politics. Through their diverse works, they have been at the forefront of social and political movements for change by contesting hegemonic narratives on socio-political and economic issues. Morocco is no exception. Cultural productions in the country have been at the forefront of popular struggles for freedom against colonialism, political and social repression and corruption. Nevertheless, cultural and artistic practices have struggled to maintain their independence in the face of the state, which makes constant attempts to co-opt them and use artists to promote an official image of Morocco as a reformist liberal state.²

This special collection of articles, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary Cultural Production in Morocco', is based on the papers delivered at a successful international conference organised at SOAS, University of London, on the 21st of March 2014.³ The papers

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² For a detailed discussion of this topic, see a special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* on "Contemporary Moroccan Cultural Production: Between Dissent and Co-optation" guest edited by Karima Laachir, Volume 25, Issue 3, 2013.

³ I would like to thank the sponsors of the conference: The Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge, The British Council in Rabat, and The Moroccan British Society. Thank you also to the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) for sponsoring the keynote speech delivered by Mohamed Achaari. Thanks must also go to Yasir Suleiman, Paul Anderson, Fleur Montanaro, Martin Rose, Ibtissame Berrado and all the team at the British Council in Rabat for their assistance in bringing the speakers of this conference together. I would like also to thank the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal for North African Studies* for their valuable feedback on the papers of this collection, as well as George Joffe, Ruth Mas, and Nora Parr for all their help.

that came out of that conference explore the role played by contemporary Moroccan literature, cinema, and popular culture—among other genres of cultural production—in revealing the complex social and political tensions in a society aspiring to freedom. This special issue is unique in its attempt to study contemporary multilingual Moroccan cultural products in Arabic *Fusha*, *Darija*, *Amazigh* and French and their role in transforming the nature of the connection between the cultural sphere and the exercise of power.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2013) claims that aesthetics and politics are intertwined and are not autonomous spheres. Politics for him is not just about ‘the practice of power’ and what people demand, ‘the enactment of collective wills and interests’, or about institutional and social hierarchies. Rather, it is about what people do to challenge the hierarchical order and set of social arrangements in which they are living (2013, 152). This challenge of hierarchical social arrangements by a collective of people who perceive them as unjust (and those in solidarity with them) not only disrupts this order and its exercise of power but also, and most importantly, the epistemic normativity and ‘naturalness’ attached to the order—or what Rancière calls the ‘partition of the sensible’ (2013, 152). Politics then is a ‘dissensus’ from a normative ‘partition of the sensible’, i.e. a deep disruptive practice of normalised conceptual underpinning of a set of hierarchical social orders and forms of domination.

Like politics, aesthetics also disrupts a particular distribution of the sensible but in a different way. As Rancière puts it: “Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible” (2013, 140). For Rancière, aesthetics does not refer to art as a whole, but rather to a particular artistic practice in which ‘the field of experience, severed from its traditional reference points, is therefore open for new restructuring through the “free play” of aestheticization’ (Corcoran in Rancière 2013, 17). It is this ‘free play’ allows aesthetics the creation of alternative ‘partition of the sensible’ or alternative imagining of society, and therefore challenges the existing normative social hierarchies. If the aesthetic movement of politics is about the collective, or ‘the framing of *we* ... whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts’, the politics of aesthetics is different, because it ‘does not give a collective voice to the anonymous. Instead, it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience. In this way, it aids to help create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed’ (2013, 141-2).

Rancière’s conceptualisation of the political character of aesthetics is pertinent to the collection of essays in this special issue, which explores how the aesthetics of cultural production—i.e. modes and forms of artistic creation and innovation—are intertwined with politics in terms of providing alternative visions and ‘imagining’ to the social and political spheres in Morocco. A number of Moroccan critics draw on this point; Ahmed al-Yaburi (2006) for example notes that Moroccan literature has always been ‘engaged’ with its social and historical contexts through the use of innovative aesthetics that has been changing to reflect the shifting dynamics of Moroccan society. Abdelatif Laabi (2013, 21-22) notes that despite the difficulties and repression faced by cultural producers in Morocco, they have been

at the forefront of change by ‘renewing knowledge, intellect and imagination’. Abdelkebir Khatibi (1983, 61) pushes for the plurality of Moroccan culture and its multilingual diversity and argues for the ‘power of the word’ or aesthetics or what he calls ‘poetic force’ that can oppose the ‘word of power’ or hegemonic structures of power. Along these lines, Mohamed Achaari’s essay in this special collection considers ‘creativity as a political choice’ or aesthetic practices as a political intervention emphasising that the cultural and the political spheres are intertwined in a complex way and cannot be separated from each other. In his article, Achaari notes that since 1960s, the postcolonial cultural field in Morocco (despite the lack of resources and the State’s co-optation and repression) has seen waves of renewal and experimentation that challenge power and despotism and offer visions of change.

This special issue brings together a wide range of expertise on Moroccan cultural production and popular culture from scholars based in Morocco, Europe, and the United States. The articles explore various themes including the aesthetics of Moroccan multilingual literature (particularly the novel, short story, and theatre) and the way it has created a culture of dissent. They also examine the mapping of neo-liberal Morocco by popular cinema and the complex role of popular culture such as hip hop music and fashion in reproducing and/or challenging hegemonic definitions of national identity.

Mohamed Achaari’s essay on ‘Creativity as a Political Choice’ provides an astute introduction to this special issue; he offers a complex and nuanced picture of the interaction of the cultural and political spheres in Morocco since independence and how the cultural field has been pivotal in social and political movement of change. Achaari argues that aesthetic practices and creativity are a form of political intervention that can correct the derailed democratic project in Morocco and challenge the rise of traditionalism as well as religious conservatism. He argues that the important developments witnessed by the multilingual cultural field in Morocco and the expansion of means of expression and knowledge through various languages: Fuhsa, Amazigh, French, and the vernacular are paving the way for a new cultural environment that will have a deep impact on the political one.

My own contribution to this volume, ‘The Aesthetics and Politics of “Reading Together” Moroccan Novels in Arabic and French’ takes up the issue of multilingual cultural production in Morocco, particularly in relation to the literary field. It raises the problematic separation of Moroccan novels written in Arabic and French in literary studies and the disconnected and polarized literary histories that have emerged as a result. The paper proposes ‘reading together’ multilingual literary traditions that moves beyond linguistic determinism and hence an exclusive understanding of ‘national’ literature. It is a comparative, entangled reading that sheds light on their entangled ‘local’ aesthetics and politics, and their strong ties to a vernacular context.

Taieb Belghazi and Abdelhay Moudden’s essay on “*Ihbat*: Disillusionment and the Arab Spring in Morocco” engages with the Arabic concept of *ihabt*—disillusionment that breeds political fatigue and resignation—in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, and the failures of the 20 February pro-democracy movement in Morocco. The authors explore the condition of *ihabt* through the lens of fiction, as they argue that it is fiction that gives alternatives insights

on the events of the 20 February movement and sheds light on the people's emotions, frustrations, and unfulfilled hopes. They examine three texts published in the aftermath of the 20 February movement: two novels and a play (*Al-Haraka* by Abdelilah Belekziz (2012), *Far From Noise, Close To Quiet* by Mohamed Berrada (2014) and *Don't Bury Too Fast Big Brother* by Driss Ksikes (2013)). Belghazi and Moudden argue that *ihbat* does not constitute a static condition in the three texts under scrutiny; instead, it engenders an exploration of new methods of resistance.

Larbi Touaf's essay 'The legacy of dissent: Mohamed Khair-Eddine and the ongoing cultural diversity debate in Morocco' examines the work of Mohammed Khair-Eddine whose aesthetics and politics have always been associated with dissensus and rebellion. Touaf focuses on Khair-Eddine's postcolonial novel *Agadir* (1967), considered an innovative text in both narrative style and approach in the history of the Moroccan novel. Touaf notes that the themes of the novels—from cultural identity, religious practice, to political system and social values—continue to be pertinent in contemporary Morocco. He argues that the aesthetics and politics of 'oppositinality' that mark the writing of Khair-Eddine represent what Touaf calls 'the dream deferred', a dream of a democratic and just society.

Abdellatif Akbib's paper, '*Flower Freak: How Things Fall Apart in Mohamed Choukri's Short Stories*' focuses on the literary genre of the short story in Morocco and uses Mohamed Choukri's collection *Majnoun Al Ward* (1993) (*Flower Freak*) as a case study. Choukri is one of the most celebrated of Moroccan writers, known for his candid reflection on the deprivation and misery of those who live at the lower echelon of Moroccan society: the unemployed, prostitutes, thieves, poverty-stricken youth, and the exploited poor. Akbib focuses his analysis on the title piece of the collection 'Flower Freak' and demonstrates how Choukri's aesthetics in the short story, i.e. his use of minimal plot, dramatized characterisation and epiphany, translates Choukri's politics and his critique of social degeneration and political breakdown which are both emblematic of the neo-liberal market economy and its negative influence on Moroccan society.

Cleo Jay's essay, 'Playing the "Berber": the performance of Amazigh identities in contemporary Morocco' discusses the development of the Amazigh cultural movement through the prism of Amazigh theatre and its impact as an identity marker and a tool of contestation. Jay argues that theatre and its use of local Berber dialects have been able to play an important role in the valorisation of these dialects, producing cultural events made by and for Berberophone populations who have been at the margins of mainstream culture. Jay maintains that Amazigh theatre reflects the dynamics of 'glocalisation' as it is both local and transnational, and has been inspired by Amazigh cultural heritage as well by European influences.

Soumia Boutkhil's essay, 'In Their Front Yard: Deconstructing Masculinities in Bahaa Trabelsi's Novels' explores the works of the feminist writer Bahaa Trabelsi and their subversion of dominant forms of masculinity in Morocco. Through a close reading of Trabelsi's three novels *Une Femme Tout Simplement* (1995), *Une Vie à Trois* (2002) and *Slim, les Femmes et la Mort* (2004), and her collection of short stories *Parlez-moi d'Amour*

(2014), Bouthkhil show how the texts offer insights into an oppressive social order whose victims are both male and female. Boutkhil considers Trabelsi's texts as part of a social development that pushes the boundaries social norms and conformity.

Valerie Orlando's essay on 'Women, Madness, Myth & Film: Exploring Moroccan Psychological Trauma and Postmemory in *Pegase* (Mohamed Mouftakir, 2010)' focuses on Mohamed Mouftakir's film *Pegase* (2010) as a case study which represents a trend in recent cinematic production in Morocco. The author notes a rise of works that deal with the psychological traumas of the Years of Lead, or the repressive regime in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, particularly on women. Through a close analysis of the film and its cinematic techniques, Orlando argues that *Pegase* captures the traumatic memories of the past on women including those of rape and violence, and therefore, offers a healing space which is vital to what Orlando calls a 'postmemory' process that can allow the nation to come to terms with this dark period of its history.

Jamal Bahmad's essay, 'Mapping neoliberal Morocco: melodrama and realist aesthetics in the films of Hakim Noury' also examines contemporary cinematic production in Morocco by focusing on Hakim Noury's films *A Woman's Fate* (1998) and *A Love Story* (2002). Bahmad considers Noury's films part of what he calls the New Urban Cinema; a cinema that reflects on urban socio-economic inequalities, political, and social repression aggravated by the neo-liberal market economy in Morocco. Bahmad argues that Noury's simple plots and unpretentious techniques allow him not only to attract large audiences but also to capture the everyday life of ordinary people transformed by the forces of global capitalism and its negative effects.

Cristina Moreno Almeida's paper, 'The politics of taqlidi rap: Reimagining Moroccanness in the era of global flows' examines the politics of aesthetics of youth music culture, particularly that of *taqlidi* rap (traditional rap), which combines Moroccan traditional music and instruments such as those of Gnawa and Andalus with contemporary beats. Almeida explores how taqlidi rap's mixed aesthetics allows rappers to expand the boundaries of Moroccanness, but at the same time can play into the Moroccan ruling elite's agenda of promoting Morocco as a liberal, modern and yet traditional and 'authentic' state. By analysing the works of groups such as H-Kayne, Don Bigg, and DIZZY DROS, Almeida argues that Moroccan rap gives young artists as a space in which to reshape and negotiate complex politics of Moroccan postcolonial national identity by aesthetically constructing complex versions of this identity.

Angela Jansen's essay, 'Defining Moroccanness: The Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary Moroccan Fashion Design' examines the innovative style of a new generation of Moroccan fashion designers inspired by the country's cultural diversity and heterogeneous heritage. Jansen argues that this radical break in style represents a desire of contemporary designers for more freedom in relation to individual rights to do with religious and cultural identity. Jansen perceives their new aesthetics as a challenge to dominant and fixed ideas of Moroccanness.

What these essays collectively show, is that despite a lack of resources, and the pressures of censorship, state's co-optation, and repression, contemporary multilingual cultural productions in Morocco have been vital in creating social and political awareness against colonialism, political and social domination and corruption. This collection of papers examines the multifaceted way multilingual cultural products such as novels, short stories, theatre, films, rap music and fashion design engage with and protest against dominant social and political discourses on memory, religion, gender, national identity and politics. This is what Rancière (2013, 152) calls epistemic 'naturalness' attached to the 'distribution of the sensible' in contemporary Morocco. The diverse aesthetics analysed in this collection offers a politics of 'dissensus' that disrupts systems of domination and offers alternative imagining of Moroccan society, a society that aspires to freedom and dignity.

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